
Posted on Mon, Nov. 30, 2009

In N.J., a fight for immigration changes

By Maya Rao

Inquirer Staff Writer

Advocates for federal immigration reform are using Riverside as the setting for a series of programs to make their case for why the United States should offer undocumented immigrants who meet certain standards a path to citizenship.

The Burlington County community of 8,000 drew national attention in 2006 with the passage of an ordinance that punished those who hired or rented to illegal immigrants. Legal challenges ensued, and the Borough Council - which had reasoned that an influx of immigrants was straining its housing, public safety, and school systems - revoked the controversial measure the following year.

Much of Riverside's large Brazilian population had left by then, and religious and community leaders gathered in a church basement here last week said the exodus left businesses struggling and stripped the borough of its vitality.

The New Jersey Immigration Policy Network hosted a faith-based gathering in Riverside on Tuesday night. More community outreach is planned for the coming months, said executive director Charles "Shai" Goldstein.

"Part of the reason we're doing the event is to reestablish a more welcoming atmosphere . . . but also to recognize that it's a federal issue that should not have been dealt with by enactment of local ordinances," he said.

Though currently overshadowed by efforts at health-care reform, a national overhaul of America's immigration policies is expected to be addressed next year. Like the Riverside officials who tried to crack down on the problem, opponents of amnesty for the nation's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants favor better enforcement measures to combat a strain on public services.

The roughly 40 people gathered Tuesday at Riverside's St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church aloud passages from the Bible, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and others in a show of solidarity with Riverside's immigrant community.

The group is urging congressional leaders to support changes that would allow undocumented immigrants the ability to pay taxes, contribute to the economy, and step "out of the shadows."

"A lot of Brazilians did leave at that time. . . . It's not as active as it once was," said Riverside Police Lt. Louis Fisher, one of several police officers in attendance. Fisher is working with Goldstein to reach out to immigrants about their rights as witnesses and victims

The exodus has been an economic problem for some. Consider Jose Victor, owner of Victor's Supermarket. Business, he said, is down 35 percent over the last three years after his customer base dwindled.

"A town like Riverside, like so many towns in New Jersey, really depended on the vitality of that immigrant population," said Jose Ramos, executive director of the Spanish American Social Cultural Association in Willingboro, a social-services agency that sees a number of Riverside residents. "It actually contributed a lot to the community, and you can see that. That's why I think Riverside is such an important example."

He said undocumented immigrants in Riverside and elsewhere who receive legal representation from the association face discrimination and are vulnerable to exploitation by landlords or law enforcement.

The Rev. Angelo Amaral of St. Peter's expressed concern about the fate of Riverside and its immigrants.

"We are doing this kind of movement to [make] the city alive," he said, "to give [undocumented immigrants] support and tell them they are not alone."

Contact staff writer Maya Rao
at 856-779-3220 or mrao@phillynews.com.